

FREED TO SERVE

Sermon, July 10, 2017

Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-26

Monday we celebrated our nation's birth, that 4th of July in 1776 when our forbearers declared their independence ... their freedom *from* British rule. We were freed from subjugation, freed from taxation without representation (*well, for the most part*), freed from unlawful search and seizure, freed from the constraints of tyranny. But we were not just freed FROM. We were also freed FOR. We were freed FOR life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, freed to pursue all the good and right and true things that lead to genuine happiness. We were and are NOT freed, however, to do whatever we please. True freedom has its limits, and the Constitution places our beloved freedoms within the context of certain limits ... because unlimited freedom can become as much a tyrant as any monarch or dictator. Some things we pursue in our relentless pursuit of happiness can be more enslaving than the worst tyrant.

Paul writes, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*" We talk about being freed from sin, freed from guilt, freed from judgment, freed from fear. Jesus Christ and His sacrificial life have indeed freed us from all that and more, yes. Jesus has liberated us, given us the gift of freedom. But there were some in Galatia who thought being free in Christ meant being free to do anything they pleased. Like so many today, they could only equate freedom with complete independence and autonomy. They thought true freedom meant having no constraints whatsoever, being absolutely autonomous and sovereign over our own lives. These people concluded that if Christ has set us free, we must be free for anything that strikes our fancy, anything our hearts desired. But there is no quicker way to become enslaved again ... enslaved to passions, appetites, desires, addictions and other destructive ways of "life."

People then and now like to think, "*I'm only free if I can do whatever my heart desires.*" At its extreme, you have Enlightenment French philosopher Denis Diderot, who is famously (*or, infamously*) quoted as saying, "*Man will never be truly free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.*" That's a bit, um, graphic, but to many like Diderot, the monarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the "king" and the "priest," are somewhat simplistically seen as putting restraints on our freedom with the arbitrary rules, artificial mores and restrictive laws of the almost-mythic "they" who are out to take something away from us, causing us to suffer for "their" benefit ... if humanity could just be free of all religious and/or state-imposed restraint, including the restraint of those who help establish, maintain and enforce the social order of the magistrates and clergy, then we would be truly free.

As a bit of a related aside, I hope you didn't miss the tragic irony this past week of the five police officers murdered (*and eleven wounded*) in Dallas while they were protecting the freedom of those who were protesting the police. Note just who protectively raced *toward* the gunfire when the shots rang out. And note who desperately desired protection of their "life and liberty" in the face of mortal threat to their freedom. Freedom needs structure and protection and order and moral stability and the rule of law.

"*I'm only free if I can do whatever my heart desires.*" Now, come on. We all know our hearts, even the hearts of the very best of us, are just cauldrons of conflicting desires. There are all kinds of things I would really like to do, not all of which will enable me to freely live and/or to live fully and well, and not all of which will enable those whose lives I touch to live freely, fully and/or well. For one simple example, I'm a somewhat overweight man in my early 60s who would like to live for a long time. I would also like to eat lots and lots of Allie's donuts and thick steaks with each meal. These are incompatible desires of my heart (*as well as incompatible desires TO my heart*) ... I want to live to a ripe old age and I want to eat whatever I want whenever I want to eat it. I think it was C.S. Lewis who succinctly pointed out that giving in to all our desires leads to everything that is the REVERSE of health and freedom. Our hearts want contradictory things. Diderot also somewhat loftily proclaimed, "*Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things.*" But unrestrained passions, Monsieur Diderot, can cause great destruction to the human soul and do anything BUT elevate and free us, not to mention the destruction our unrestrained passions can cause others. Real freedom is not found in the ability to do whatever we want, because we want too many contradictory (*and consequently, self-destructive*) things. Freedom is not so much the freedom to do what we want; true freedom is found in the ability and desire to wholly want what is good, to wholly want what we were designed to do, to wholly and freely live into the world for which we were made by God's divine design.

When is a fish really free? Not when it has "escaped" its "restrictive" world of the water. A fish is not free flopping about on the land, flying through the sky, or sitting on a sofa watching TV ... it's only really

free when it is *in the water*, because it was built and designed for the water. We more often than not become less liberated because we are doing whatever we want, instead of wholly wanting and doing what we really need. Again, real freedom is found in the ability and desire and determination to wholly want and do what we were designed for, to live as we were meant to live. Paul writes (verse 13) *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

That's our "water;" that's our element! **LOVE**. To serve in love, to live in love. We were created and designed to be loved and to give love, to *"serve one another in love,"* and real freedom liberates us to truly love, to wholly and constructively serve those we love. Real freedom is always compatible with love. There's so much more I could say on this, but for now I'll just reiterate what I believe Paul to be saying, *"Don't ever use your freedom in such a way as to destroy love or your ability to love!"* Verse 17: *"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the spirit, and the spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."*

For a short "primer" in religious vocabulary, here are two simple Biblical definitions/synonyms:

SIN IS SLAVERY. SALVATION IS FREEDOM.

Sin always enslaves us, sin always makes us less than what we were created to be, sin always hinders our ability to love well, sin always cripples us, sin always lessens and limits us. And salvation is all about freedom, about what God is doing in Jesus Christ to free us to be who we were created to be. In obedience to Jesus Christ and by the liberating power of His spirit we are freed *from* our self-indulgent pasts, freed *for* living free lives, and freed to serve one another in love. Love is what we were created for; it is the environment into which we best live.

(The following was left out due to time constraints; I include it here – slc) Some of you may remember Michelangelo's philosophy of sculpture. Simply put, Michelangelo's philosophy was the final image, the final work of art, was already there inside the stone. The artist's job was to free that beautiful image from its stony prison, to release it, by removing everything that didn't belong, chiseling away that which encumbered it. Well, Jesus shares Michelangelo's philosophy. The divine image of God in which we were created is there within us. He wants to free that image, free us from that which encumbers us, free us for the great purposes He has for us, free us by the power of His grace, free us to be who we were created to be. He wants us to be freed from all the stuff that just doesn't "belong" there, from all the burdens and weights encumbering the divine image created in us from the beginning. Free us from our slaveries, free us from our self-destructive and self-limiting habits and addictions, free us from all that which is keeping us from being who we were uniquely created to be. He wants to just chisel away all that stuff that just doesn't belong. (-- end of omitted excerpt)

I've said this a few times before, and I'm sure to say it again a few more times before I eventually retire, but I like to point out that Jesus doesn't necessarily want to *change* us so much as He wants to *fulfill* us. As we really grow in Jesus Christ, we find He doesn't necessarily change us into somebody different; rather, He frees us to be who we were meant to be all along. This new life He is crafting within us is a purer form of ourselves. As we grow in faith and discipleship, He is lovingly restoring the divine image of God in our lives; He develops within us the self we were created to be from the beginning.

One of the most profound pleasures of my married life was that I was more myself with my dear wife than I was with anybody, including my parents. Sure, being in love with Ann changed me, being in love led me places I never dreamed I would go, some delightful and some difficult; being in love enabled me to do things, achieve things, enjoy things like never before or since ... but again, it's almost misleading to say that being in love with my wife changed me ... rather, it fulfilled me. Being in love helped bring out the very best in me, the "me" I really was created to be. Like a divine Lover, like a divine Sculptor, Jesus Christ wants to fashion us into a purer form of ourselves, the way God designed us to be all along. And as we grow to love Him more, the more we understand that He really wants us to be free. Free from the stuff that doesn't belong there in your lives. Freed for the purpose of being who you were created to be. Free to live life fully, abundantly and lovingly. Freed in Jesus Christ to be productive, useful, fruitful, dependable, lovely and loveable. Free *to* make a real and significant and loving difference in the world about us. And free *to* be a real blessing to those who love us and who depend on us.

The King of Heaven loves us! He is no King George seeking tyrannical rule over our lives for His selfish purposes; He wants us to live as a free people. Free to live fully and abundantly. Again, free to be productive, useful, fruitful, dependable, lovely and loveable; free to make a real, significant, positive and lasting difference in the world about us, free to serve one another in love. Free to be who God created us to be in the first place ... for it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

"O God, Your Word is truth. Do sanctify us by the truth, and help us to know the truth, so that we may be truly free. Amen."